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Boo's Superpower: An Exploration of To Kill a Mockingbird's Boo Radley on the Autism Spectrum

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Boo Radley: A Literary Figure with a Superhuman Learning Disability

Studies and lens help researchers narrow their scopes so they can analyze literature thoroughly and effectively. When looking at literary figures with disabilities, for example, researchers investigate disability studies. Disability studies “encourages scholars to value disability as a form of cultural difference” (Mullaney). Autism spectrum disorder, which falls under disability studies, works well with a sociocultural lens because it relates to the sociocultural theory of cognitive development. The sociocultural theory “is an emerging theory in psychology that looks at important contributions that society makes to individual development” (Cherry). It relates to autism since society’s response to people with autism influences their perceptions of themselves and the world. Based on the modern understanding of autism, various, well-known literary figures fit the description.

To understand why a literary figure has autism, one needs to understand the disorder. Autism is “characterized by deficits in communicate, language, behavior, and social skills” (Griffin 183). While “a core area of deficiency for individuals across the spectrum is their ability to understand and use social skills,” autism actually a “spectrum disorder” (183). Therefore, it affects people differently and to varying degrees. Since autism can have different effects on people’s personalities, it is easy to identify at least some of its characteristics in literary figures.

One literary figure that research supports on the autism spectrum is Arthur “Boo” Radley from Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Boo’s interactions with the people in Maycomb

County characterize him as someone with a disability. Not only do the citizens spread rumors about atrocious acts that he most likely does not commit, but his caretakers also discuss whether or not to send him to an asylum. Unfortunately, since Lee sets the novel in the 1960's, how the town treats Boo accurately depicts the reality for all people with disabilities at the time.

Moreover, Boo exhibits traits that are common in people with autism. Boo is childlike, and he has irregular communication methods, social skills, motor functions, and light sensitivities.

However, Boo's autism also serves as an unexpected superpower, because he is impressively hyperaware, highly intelligent, and arguably able to save Scout and Jem since his disability inhibits him from worrying about repercussions the same way other people do. All things considered, Boo models how someone with a disability can overcome adversity since the townspeople initially fear and ridicule him yet respect his heroism by the end of the novel.

Lee portrays Boo as childlike, which supports him on the autism spectrum. Even though Boo usually "stays in the house," he pursues a relationship with the Finch children as if they are his peers (Lee 49). For instance, Scout discovers "two pieces of chewing gum minus their outer wrappers" in a knothole on the Radley's property (37). Although Lee does not explicitly say who leaves the gum, the children believe that it is from Boo. They continue to find gifts in the knothole until Mr. Nathan Radley, Boo's brother, fills it with cement. Jem and Scout's final collection includes a ball of twine, two pennies, a watch, a knife, a ball of twine, and two hand-carved figurines. In addition, after Jem gets caught on a wire fence during an unwelcomed visit at the Radley's, Boo mends the torn pants that Jem leaves behind. He also lays them outside so Jem can retrieve them inconspicuously (66). Not to mention, Boo gives Scout a blanket on the night of Miss Maudie's house fire, since Scout's family evacuates into the cold (82). Many individuals with autism behave as if they are younger than they are. Therefore, how Boo's bonds

with six-year-old Scout and ten-year-old Jem rather than the other adults in Maycomb County makes sense.

Another trait that classifies Boo as someone with autism is his communication, which is almost entirely nonverbal. In chapter four of her book *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum*, Sonya Loftis observes how Boo only speaks once in the entire novel (Loftis 81). He asks Scout, “Will you take me home?” but even then “he almost [whispers]” (Lee 320). Many individuals on the spectrum are nonverbal and convert to unconventional methods of communication, as Boo does (Griffin 183). Loftis also reports that “when the other characters address him directly, he does not respond” (Loftis 81). More often, Boo relies on gestures and physical objects to communicate. For example, Boo confirms that he wants to “say good night to Jem” with a nod (Lee 319). He also expresses his “compassion for the children” through the gifts he leaves them in the knothole (Loftis 81). Like many people with autism, Boo has his own linguistic style.

On a related note, Boo does not understand social cues the same way someone without autism does. Miss Maudie, the Finches’ neighbor, claims, “I remember Arthur Radley when he was a boy. He always spoke nicely to me, no matter what folks said he did. Spoke nicely as he knew how” (Lee 51). Her memory suggests that Boo has struggled with socializing since adolescence, which points toward autism since symptoms typically surface during a person’s childhood (Andrews et al). Miss Maudie also describes how “when the younger Radley boy was in his teens he became acquainted with some of the Cunninghams from Old Sarum. ... Nobody in Maycomb had nerve enough to tell Mr. Radley that his boy was in with the wrong crowd (Lee 10-11). As someone with autism, it makes sense that Boo cannot discern whether someone is a positive or negative influence. Additionally, in social situations, Boo’s body language is

awkward. When Scout recognizes him in Jem's room, he looms "against the wall" rather than introduces himself (310). At that point, Boo is a hero and should want praise, but he is uncomfortable instead. Scout also "[wonders] why Atticus [has] not brought a chair" for Boo but determines he is "probably more comfortable where he [is]" (306). The Finch house is an unfamiliar place, and Boo clearly does not want to stay or socialize. As a matter of fact, any type of social interaction is difficult for his character, which points to his diagnosis.

As someone on the spectrum, Boo is prone to irregular motor functions. Scout thoroughly describes Boo's body language in chapter thirty-one when she depicts how "every move he [makes is] uncertain" and he behaves "as if he [is] not sure his hands and feet could make proper contact with the things he [touches]" (Lee 318). In other words, Boo struggles with sensory perception. Loftis argues that Boo has dyspraxia, a condition that occurs frequently in patients with autism and encompasses poor balance, rhythm, and hand-eye coordination (Loftis 82). Dyspraxia also complicates someone's ability to navigate places, even when they are familiar, which explains why Boo wants Scout to guide him through the Finch household and back to the Radley place.

Finally, Boo's sensitivity to light is also a symptom of his autism. Scout wonders why Atticus invites them to the porch rather than the living room before she understands "the living room lights [are] awfully strong" (Lee 313). Scout never mentions the lights when she is at home with Jem or Atticus, so Boo cannot handle lights that are acceptable for most people. She also assesses that "Boo would feel more comfortable in the dark" (313). It makes sense that Boo dislikes lights because he spends so much time in the hiding in the dark, Radley place, but autism also explains his behavior.

While Boo's autism initially leads to his isolation, it also serves as an unexpected superpower because it is arguably the reason he saves Scout and Jem. A symptom of autism is impulsivity, so Boo exercises self-defense against Mr. Ewell more quickly than a person without autism would. Likewise, Boo does not worry about repercussions the same way other people do. He is more concerned about Jem and Scout's safety in that moment than his freedom in the future because his mind functions in the present. Atticus, who is usually very formal, stresses his appreciation for Boo as well as the significance of his actions when he refers to Boo by his first name and says, "Thank you for my children, Arthur" (Lee 317). Boo's impulsivity reunites a father with his family and protects a Maycomb County from a dangerous man.

Boo's above-average intelligence is another superpower that his autism enhances. The details that depict Boo's intelligence are subtle. However, Lee briefly mentions the dolls of Scout and Jem that Boo creates. Their resemblance to the children is so uncanny that Scout and Jem recognize themselves almost immediately. Scout even describes the figurines as "perfect miniatures of two children" (Lee 67). People with disabilities often excel in specific areas. In fact, Hugh Herr gives the TED Talk "The new bionics that let us run, climb, and dance" and discusses how people with disabilities are even more capable than members of the abled community (Herr). Therefore, Boo's intelligence makes him more advanced than other adults and allows him succeed in areas where they do not.

Finally, Boo's hyperawareness also makes him more advanced than other characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He spends the majority of the book observing people from the Radley place; meanwhile, even characters who frequently interact struggle to comprehend each other. For example, Jem and Scout believe that their neighbor, Mrs. Dubose, is an unjustifiably cruel, old woman when the reality is that she struggles with drug addiction. However, because he is

hyperaware, Boo has a greater understanding of the people in Maycomb. In addition, even though the children's play about Boo offends Atticus, Boo enjoys the show and offers the children props to enhance its realism. He is hyperaware of how many people perceive him as dangerous; therefore, Scout, Jem, and Dill's genuine curiosity satisfies and entertains him. All in all, Boo's hyperawareness gives him a more positive and compassionate outlook on life.

Other scholars argue that Boo's behavior demonstrates how he is a victim of circumstance, not superhuman. During an email interview, Callus points out how "Boo [is] only respected when he [acts] heroically" (Callus). The play *Boo*, which is an adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, explores Boo's identity further. In Matt Hargrove's article "Side Effects: An Analysis of Mind the Gap's Boo and the Reception of Theatre Involving Learning Disabled Actors," he explains that the production depicts Boo as "a young man who has Asperger's syndrome" (Hargrove 497). Asperger's is on the autism spectrum, and it explains many of Boo's personality traits (Andrews et al). Hargrove also notes that Asperger's is "a condition [Boo] shares with the actor playing him" (Hargrove 497). Since the play only casts "learning-disabled actors," Hargrove reports how the audience responds (497). Unfortunately, it is not positive. Spectators are often "disappointed" and question the "authenticity of the performance" because the actors do not seem to be acting since they fit the roles so well (502). Those findings relate to Callus's opinion because she argues that "people [judge] [Boo] from the exterior and in accordance with their own norms and standards" (Callus). Just like how the audience does not want to accept the actors, Maycomb County does not accept Boo until he behaves extraordinarily. From that perspective, his learning disability is a hindrance because it separates him from society for the majority of his life.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the people in Maycomb believe Boo is a threat, but the reality is that they misunderstand him because he falls somewhere on the autism spectrum, which medical professionals do not thoroughly grasp in the 1960's. Surprisingly, Boo's autism is his strength by the end of the novel, not only because he is highly-intelligent and hyperaware but because he impulsively saves Scout and Jem. Understanding his unconventional qualities as superpowers opens an array of new possibilities for his character, such as empowering young audiences by demonstrating how someone with a learning disability can overcome adversity.